BOOK REVIEW

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Leveling the playing field

James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist for his work in the fields of econometrics and microeconomics, focuses on increasing income disparity in the United States in his recent book, *Giving Kids a Fair Chance: A Strategy That Work*s. Per Heckman, "While we celebrate equality of opportunity, we live in a society in which birth is becoming fate." In other words, much of the social inequality in the nation at present stems from low generational mobility. Children born to disadvantaged families do not have as many developmental opportunities that lead to success and frequently pass that disadvantage on to future generations.

Heckman argues that early childhood intervention is the most efficient strategy for closing this opportunity gap because it has shown the greatest potential to increase lifetime earnings. He supports this theory by citing three lessons for social policy. First, noncognitive abilities such as physical and mental health, perseverance, attentiveness, motivation, and self-confidence contribute as strongly to success as the cognitive skills that are traditionally the focus of social programs. Second, both cognitive and noncognitive skills begin to develop in early childhood and require environmental stimuli to flourish. Last, policy focused on early childhood development has been shown to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged children.

Throughout the book, Heckman references the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian Projects. Participants in these two early childhood intervention programs reported a number of advantages later in life, including higher lifetime earnings and an increased probability of owning a home; they also were less likely to go on welfare, be incarcerated, or require special education. Critics of the programs contend that sample sizes were too small, so that the effects found probably reflect sample bias. Heckman counters this objection by pointing out that the Perry and Abecedarian experiments were both randomized trials and have had decades of followup observations.

Even if one accepts Heckman's presumed high rates of return on early childhood interventions, additional issues cloud this type of intervention. For example, policymakers would need to determine who should be targeted with what programs, who should provide the programs, and who should pay for them. Another concern is the potential stigma attached to the parents of children who are classified as disadvantaged. To address this issue, Heckman suggests that interventions be made both culturally diverse (to account for unique family circumstances) and universal, with a sliding fee schedule based on family income. As an economist by profession, I appreciate these suggestions but wish that he would have gone into more detail in regard to their design and implementation. Public policy suggestions are not sound unless they address how they will be implemented effectively.

The second half of the book is devoted to responses to Heckman's arguments by professionals in the field—from fellow economists, to social scientists, to public policy experts in education. This section provides a forum for different opinions and helps enrich the reader's understanding of the issue. A weakness of the section, however, is that many of those responders support their arguments by referencing additional studies without citing sources, leaving them apparently lacking the same academic rigor as Heckman.

The book is an easy read for economists and noneconomists alike and is intentionally brief. This format makes the topic easily accessible to a wider audience and helps foster a more open discussion of the issue by other disciplines. Heckman's style of writing does at times read more like a call to action than a theory supported by extensive economic research, however, and parts of the book would have benefited from more quantitative support (although including less quantitative material could have been intentional in order to reach a broader audience).

I recommend this book to those looking for a discussion of new ways to improve outcomes for disadvantaged individuals, from an economist's perspective as well as from the views of professionals in public policy, education, law, and other disciplines.

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